

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin III, commander, Multi-National Corps - Iraq, September 22, 2008.

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): Well, good morning, everyone, and welcome to the old Pentagon briefing room. Appreciate you finding your way back over here.

We have with us today Lieutenant General Lloyd J. Austin III, who is the commanding general for Multinational Corps-Iraq, and he assumed command on February 14th of this year, and as such he directs approximately 150,000 joint coalition -- joint coalition forces in Iraq. And he has been to us in this format one time before, as you probably remember.

And with that, I'm just going to turn it over to him for his opening comments. So sir, let's turn it over to you.

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thanks, Gary, for that introduction. And it's good to be with all of you again. It's also good to see those of you who were in Iraq recently, and I hope that your travels to Afghanistan went well.

We've had a productive month since my last Pentagon press conference. We've experienced continued low levels of violence, with 15 of the last 16 weeks remaining below the 200-attacks-per-week mark. In Baghdad, which as you know is a city of roughly 6 million people, we've averaged less than 4 attacks per day for the last 13 weeks. And this is truly remarkable and it would've been hard to imagine this just six months ago.

In another sign of progress, Anbar province, which was at one time the home of the Sunni insurgency, transitioned to Iraqi control just three weeks ago. This milestone would not have been thought possible a year ago, but because of the hard work of our men and women and our Iraqi partners, Anbar continues to maintain a very low level of violence, even after the transfer.

So things continue to move in a positive direction, but we fully recognize that we still have much work to do. The environment here, as you know, can change rapidly, and so we have to guard against things that could change our course. We remain focused sustaining the momentum we have achieved. And so we're continuing offensive operations with our Iraqi partners against Sunni and Shi'a extremists and we remain committed to continuing to provide security for the Iraqi people.

Combined coalition and Iraqi security force operations in the north, in the west and in Baghdad have put al Qaeda in disarray, and these operations have significantly reduced the number of foreign fighters coming across the border.

And while al Qaeda has a complex network that is good at reseeding these fighters, our actions to stem the flow of foreign fighters and our ability to take extremist leaders off the battlefield are having positive effects on the security conditions.

We've also had success against special groups criminals in the south. We've isolated them from the population and we've dealt considerable blows to their network of lethal accelerants.

Just two weeks ago, one of our patrols discovered a significant cache south of the town of Salman Pak. It contained over 400 pounds of C-4 explosive and over 2,300 explosively formed penetrator components. This was a major storage facility of EFP material, and its capture will greatly disrupt special group's criminals' ability to conduct future attacks in Baghdad and in other parts of the south.

This is just one of several caches that we've taken off the battlefield due to our increased presence in the south and due to the tremendous work of our forces. And these forces have remained on the offensive since the Charge of the Knights operation began last March. All of this, as well as the renewed commitment of the Iraqi people, is creating an environment that is less permissive for the enemy.

The improving Iraqi security forces are also adding to this environment, and they are clearly moving in the right direction. And they're increasingly in the lead and they are getting more and more proficient with each operation. But they are not yet ready to take over full security of the country. And this is not surprising, because they've been growing and training the force while they've been engaged with the enemy in places from Basra from Mosul. And they still need to build the combat enablers that will enable them to have a self-sustaining counterinsurgency force, enablers such as fire support, combat engineers, intelligence and surveillance, and appropriate battlefield medical support.

In addition to building enablers, more focus is required on the police and border forces, who are not improving in capability as quickly as the army. And as the police professionalize and improve their capability, the Iraqi army will be able to focus more on security tasks outside of the cities. And as the border forces continue to improve, security within Iraq will continue to further improve as well. This is the direction that we're headed in, and it will take some time to accomplish this.

One of our primary focus areas as we move forward is transitioning the Sons of Iraq program to the Iraqi government. The volunteer movement that started in Anbar and spread across the rest of the country significantly contributed to the security successes that we are now taking advantage of.

The sons of Iraq have paid a heavy price fighting al Qaeda and other insurgent groups, and it's important that the government of Iraq responsibly transition them into meaningful employment. Prime Minister Maliki has assured me that the government will help those who help the people of Iraq. And so next week in Baghdad the government

will accept responsibility for approximately 54,000 Sons of Iraq, and we will be there to assist in the transfer.

We spent the last few weeks working hand in hand with our Iraqi partners on this transition, and I'm confident that this will go well. And you should know that we will not abandon the Sons of Iraq. We'll continue to follow up in the future to ensure that they get paid and that they do in fact transition to meaningful employment.

This is a significant opportunity for the government to demonstrate to the Iraqi people and to the rest of the world that it is serious about reconciliation and about honoring its promises -- promise to the Sons of Iraq. And so with increased security comes different challenges, challenges that I am confident that we will continue to overcome with our Iraqi partners. As a result, I remain optimistic about the future of this country.

And, finally, I would like to thank our Polish contingent for their tremendous service in Iraq. They will be finishing their support to the coalition over the next several weeks. They have been an outstanding partner and we'll miss them greatly.

And with that, I'm ready to take some of your questions.

COL. KECK: Well, thank you, sir, for that overview. And we'll go ahead and begin. I'll remind you that General Austin cannot see you, so please let him know who he's talking to and who you work for.

Lita?

Q General, it's Lolita Baldor with the Associated Press. Can you talk to us a little bit more about the situations on the border? You said that there's been a decline in foreign forces coming across the borders. Can you give us at least a broad assessment as to what percentage of decline, how much of a decline you are seeing? And is it the same on the Syrian border or on the Iranian border, if there are differences there? And can you also address the increasing tensions that we've been hearing and reading about with the Kurds?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thanks. First of all, in terms of the numbers of foreign fighters that we've seen coming into country, there's no question that over the last several months, we've seen a decline in those -- in the numbers of foreign fighters actually coming across. And that's in great part due to the fact that we've taken some measures to continue to be active in the Jazirah Desert and to do as much as we can to interdict that flow of foreign fighters coming across the Syrian border.

In terms of foreign fighters coming in from the Iranian border, you know, a while back we were fighting Jaish al-Mahdi special groups' criminals in the south.

The special groups criminals' leadership left, and we believe they went into Iran for additional resourcing and training. And we expect that many of them will try to come back. As a matter of fact, some of them have begun to try to come back. And we've -- we've been fairly successful in policing up a number of them off the battlefield. And so both north and south, I think we've been fairly effective in interdicting the flow of foreign fighters.

Having said that, we fully expect that there are some that will get through. And especially those that are coming down from the north, we can expect that each one of those will turn out to be a suicide bomber or something of that effect. So to continue to work to try to interdict the flow of foreign fighters is a very important task that we'll remain focused on.

The tension that was in the east in vicinity of Khaneqin, I think that we did see some tension several days ago. I do think that the political leadership, both sides of the fence, have done things to calm that tension. And I can tell you that between the soldiers on the ground, the soldiers on the ground are being very professional and things are improving each and every day.

Next question, please.

COL. KECK: Jim?

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. Two months ago the Iraqis launched a large operation in Diyala. What is it like in the north right now? How successful is that operation? And can you talk a little bit about the number of attacks in Mosul? And finally, this is Ramadan. Have you noticed an uptick in the number of attacks that you've had?

GEN. AUSTIN: I'll take the last part of that question first, and that refers to the numbers of attack that we've seen during the Ramadan period. I can tell you that as we compare this Ramadan to previous years, especially last year, we are greatly reduced of the numbers of attacks that occurred during Ramadan this time last year. We expect that because of the trends that we've seen in the past, that we will routinely see an uptick in the numbers of attacks during the Ramadan period.

And we have -- we did see a small spike in attacks over the weekend, but I can tell you that even with the spike, we are well below what we saw last year and the year before that. And as I said in the opening statement, we've remained below 200 attacks a week for the last -- for 16 of the last 17 weeks, which is phenomenal. And in the city of Baghdad, again, a city of over 6 million people, you know, we've averaged less than four attacks a day for the last 13 weeks or so. So that's -- again, that would have been unthinkable several months ago.

And could you say again the other part of your question, please?

Q Certainly, sir.

In Diyala, operations in Diyala and the rest of the North, I guess, Nineveh.

GEN. AUSTIN: Yeah.

The Diyala operation is an operation that we planned jointly with the Iraqi security forces and conducted and are in the process of conducting that operation with the Iraqi security forces. And having watched the leadership evolve over time, I can tell you that this is one of the best-planned operations that I have had the opportunity to work with the Iraqis on.

They have done a very good job in planning this operation. And by and large we are meeting the objectives that we set out for ourselves. As is the case with any operation, there will be points of friction. But we always work through those points of friction.

In Nineveh, we continue to place pressure on the al Qaeda network. And again that's principally in and around the city of Mosul. And I think we're having great effects in our efforts. We're making great progress.

I would say that al Qaeda is in disarray. But they are not yet defeated. And we have been clear all along about the fact that they maintain an ability to conduct high-profile attacks.

They also have a very well defined network and they have an impressive ability to reseed leadership, into that network, as we take leaders at the mid-grade and junior-grade off the battlefield. And so we'll continue to focus on the network. We'll continue to focus on those networks as well that support car bombs and other types of criminal activity.

Bottom line, I think, we're having, we're achieving a great measure of success. We have some work to do.

COL. KECK: Courtney.

Q Hi, General Austin. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Two things to follow up on.

How exactly -- you mentioned that al Qaeda is in disarray in Nineveh province. How exactly would you characterize the security situation there and specifically in Mosul? Is it a secure, would you say that it's a secure province, it's a secure city, Mosul?

And then also you mention that the ISF are not yet ready to take over full security and that they still need enablers. We've been hearing that for about a year now,

that the Iraqi security forces and specifically the Iraqi police can't sustain themselves logistically.

Can you give us any kind of an idea of a timeline of -- or maybe some goals that the U.S. and the Iraqis have set to meet this capability?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, let me start with the security situation in Nineveh that you asked about first, Courtney. We continue to work, as I said earlier, to degrade the AQI network. And that's still a work in progress. Again, they are in disarray, but they're not yet defeated.

There are -- the security continues to improve. If you look at where we were about eight months ago, I can tell you that the numbers of attacks that are occurring in Mosul and in Nineveh province on a daily basis are less than half of what we saw even eight months or nine months ago. So there is a -- there's a great measure of improvement. But we want to continue to take the levels of violence down below that. And we will -- we will continue to work at it until we're satisfied that we've done that.

And so we're not ready to declare a completely safe and secure Nineveh province, as is the case in other provinces around the country. Again, it is a work in progress, but I'm confident that we will make progress.

In terms of the Iraqi security forces, they have improved tremendously. Their level of professionalism, their level of confidence is much, much increased over what we saw nine months ago or a year ago. So they're making great strides.

And you asked -- well, we -- you said that they needed enablers a year ago. Why don't they have them yet? Well, it takes time to not only acquire the enablers but to train the force on those enablers. Remember, they've been busy growing the force and professionalizing the force, but the most important thing is that, along with us, they have been busy fighting elements of al Qaeda as well as some of the Shi'a extremist elements in the south. And so the less fighting that you have to do, the more of an opportunity you have to begin to focus on those enablers. And that's exactly what we will do in the future.

As to whether or not we can -- we can designate a point in time when we'll be absolutely finished and ready to go, I'd say that's very difficult to do because, again, we're fighting as we're trying to grow this capability.

COL. KECK: Go ahead.

Q General, Bill McMichael, Military Times newspapers. You mentioned that next week the government of Iraq will accept responsibility for 54,000 Sons of Iraq. Could you give us some detail on what sorts of jobs they'll be put into? Are they all going to be accepted into the Iraqi security forces for training and integration into the ISF?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, as you no doubt know, the total number of Sons of Iraq throughout the country is about 99,000. And 54,000 of that number reside in the Baghdad province.

And so we will start with the Baghdad province next month and transition that element first, and then we will begin to move to other parts of the country and transition those elements.

We set aside -- we said up front that about 20 percent of the total number of Sons of Iraq would go into the security forces, and so we're looking to get about 20 percent of the total population hired as policemen. There will be others that join the army, but the rest of that population will go into other types of jobs. We're working with the Iraqi government to help provide job skills and training for those that are interested. And we've made some progress there, but that will be -- that will take time.

But we should know or we should recognize that the government is committed to taking care of the Sons of Iraq. And I talked with Prime Minister Maliki and others that are senior leaders in the government, and they assure me that they will stick with the folks that have helped us or helped the country of Iraq over time, and they will ensure that these folks who have helped us are properly transitioned into civilian employment.

Q General, the 54,000 that are going to be transitioned out of the 99,000, that's in addition to the roughly 15,000 to 20,000 that have already started to be transitioned over into the ISF or into security forces jobs?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, we've got about 9,000 that have gone into police forces, and so there will be a number of others that will transition into police forces. And so again, the total number of people that go into security forces will be about 20 percent.

Q General, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. Now that Anbar province is under provincial Iraqi control, do you expect a further drawdown of forces there, given that a large portion of the forces there are enabler and support forces, and those are in pretty much high demand elsewhere in our armed forces? Do you foresee that that's likely, a further drawdown among those forces?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I think you've heard announced recently by our leadership that one of the battalions of Marines that was designated to go to Anbar province in the future will not, in fact, deploy to Iraq. And so we will decrease by some measure, but for the foreseeable future, I am not forecasting a further drawdown of capability in Anbar.

Q Hi, General. This is Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News.

Can you shed a little light on the fusion cells that have been written about, in Washington, in Bob Woodward's book and then in a Washington Post article recently,

that have helped you go after al Qaeda? It's helped you reduce, take off the battlefield these mid- and-junior-level leaders. Can you give us a little visibility into this program?

GEN. AUSTIN: Sir, I have not read Mr. Woodward's book and I'm sorry. I can't comment on what he may have said in the book.

Q If I may follow up, The Washington Post wrote that there were fusion cells of intelligence and tactical officers, working quickly with actionable intelligence to basically go after and kill quickly al Qaeda leaders. Does that ring true?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I could tell you that we routinely don't comment on any type of intelligence capability that we have or utilize. That's something that we don't, we simply don't talk about.

I can tell you that we do work closely with all elements involved in this effort, coalition forces, Iraqi security forces, Special Operations forces and conventional forces. And of course, we share information and we want to make sure we have a common picture of the battlefield. And so I think there is a great deal of sharing and fusing of information to ensure that nothing gets lost in the seams. And I'll stop there.

Q Is that helping? Is that contributing to the taking off the battlefield mid- and-junior-level al Qaeda leaders that a year ago you were not having the same level of success?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I think, if you're sharing information with all elements, you know, throughout the force, it always helps much the same.

This is, in many cases, a manhunt activity. And just as we would do in the United States of America, as we are searching for or looking for a criminal, we will share information between federal and local entities, to ensure that there are no gaps in seams and that the criminal elements can't hide in those gaps and seams. But that's -- anytime you share information with various elements, it always makes -- it improves your capability to go after criminal elements.

Q Hi, General. JJ Sutherland with NPR.

I just wanted to follow up quickly on the SOI program. You're saying 54,000 of them will be transitioning to the government of Iraq. Does that mean they're coming off of the American payroll and going onto the Iraqi government payroll?

GEN. AUSTIN: Yeah, that's a great question. That's exactly what it means. That means, for that 54,000 in October, the Iraqi government for the month of October will begin paying their salaries.



Now, this is a deliberate process that we'll go through to hand off responsibility from us to the Iraqi government.

We'll work through, you know, all of the details to make sure that every individual's accounted for and they are paid, and most importantly that they, at some point in time, get meaningful jobs. But that's exactly what it means. It means beginning the month of October for that 54,000, the government of Iraq will pay their salaries.

Q The -- I'm sorry, sir, just to continue on that. Are they going to be doing the same thing that they're doing now that the Sons of Iraq program is doing, or are they going to be transitioning into other jobs? It's only, what, 20 percent, so there's about what, 10 or 12 thousand that would actually be in police, or are they going to continue what they're doing now?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well some of them will, again, continue with security force-type duties. The vast majority, though, we want to get into some other type of employment. And that can range, you know, again there -- in terms of the type of employment, anything from, you know, working for one of the ministries to working to help rebuild the countryside and repair battle damage and that sort of things. So a wide range of jobs. Initially, it will be slow going because the economy is just beginning to expand and not a tremendous amount of jobs available, but that's one of the things the Iraqi government has to work on. And we're going to help them work on it.

Q Sir, I'm sorry. I guess what my question is that I understand eventually, you want to transition them into those jobs. But these 54,000 people have been working in their communities, have been, you know, doing some level of police work, manning checkpoints in various neighborhoods around the city. Next month is, you know, 40,000 of those just going away? Are those checkpoints they've been manning taken over by GOI forces and police, or are they going to be -- Sons of Iraq still going to be doing what they've been doing, which has been so helpful in cutting some of the violence in some violent neighborhoods, you know, in Baghdad?

GEN. AUSTIN: Yeah, again, some of them may still continue to do some of those types of things, but the vast majority of them, we want to get employed in other types of employment.

Q Sir, I understand that, but I'm saying, what happens in October? I understand eventually you want to have them be plumbers or electricians, but in October, there are a lot of checkpoints that have been manned by the Sons of Iraq. Are those checkpoints all going to go away? Are they only going to be staffed by Iraqi police now? That's my question. It's not eventually, it's next month.

GEN. AUSTIN: Yeah, next month the Iraqi government will begin to work their way through this. And there's no question that some of them, some of the checkpoints, many of the checkpoints will be -- will be manned by Iraqi security forces. In some cases, there may be SOI that will be tasked to help with that work. But in most

cases, I think the Iraqi government will be looking to transition people into different types of jobs.

COL. KECK: One more. If you haven't had a chance to --

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold at the Christian Science Monitor. As I understand it, you are looking or the -- the U.S. military's looking for the Iraqi government to step up when it comes to drawing down the number of detainees at Bucca and Cropper. Can you talk a little bit, briefly, just about the process, what you're looking for there and how confident you are that they are going to kind of meet that challenge as you look to draw down more forces -- more detainees?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, to be quite frank with you, the Task Force 134, commanded by Admiral Garfield Wright, is the agency that really controls the detainee issues. And so that question would probably be better addressed to them.

But I can tell you that working with Admiral Wright, as a commander, I'm confident that the procedures that we're using are absolutely the right ones. The folks that have been reintegrated into society have a -- that process has worked very, very well for us. I think the commanders grow more and more comfortable with that every day.

And as you can see, we've increased significantly the numbers of detainees that have been released. And so -- and the numbers of incidents where people have to -- people are re-arrested and reintegrated into the detainee facilities is very, very low. And so -- and I don't have those stats at my fingertips, but I'm sure that Admiral Wright will be willing to share them with you.

COL. KECK: Okay, sir, we have come to the end of our time. We appreciate you joining us today. And as is our custom, we'd like to turn it back over to you for any final comments or thoughts, sir.

GEN. AUSTIN: Okay, Gary, thanks. Thanks, ladies and gentlemen, for allowing me to join you again today. And I appreciate your questions.

And I'd like to close by saying that the government of Iraq will have a great opportunity over the next several months to make some significant progress and the Multinational Corps will stand side-by-side with them each step of the way.

I'd also like to say that I'm very proud of our service members and civilians for their tremendous efforts here. And my sincere thanks and appreciation goes out to the thousands of families back home for supporting our service members.

And thank you again for being here, and I look forward to talking with each and every one of you again in the future.

COL. KECK: Thank you again, sir.

GEN. AUSTIN: Thanks for coming, folks.

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